



# Meditation on the Breath: Mindfulness and Focused Attention

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## Abstract

This article explores to what degree meditation on the breath in early Buddhist thought involved focused attention. Closer inspection of instructions on this mode of meditation in the form of sixteen steps shows focused attention to be only a secondary aspect of the practice, which for the most part rather involves cultivating breadth of mind. This differs from later tradition. As the apparent result of a gradual reduction of the sixteen-step scheme to just the touch experience of the breath, a stronger focus naturally came to be required, eventually leading to the necessity of devising additional meditation techniques such as counting the breaths, a modality of practice only found in later texts. The findings from the present article suggest the need to consider “focus” on the breath and “mindfulness” of the process of breathing as related but distinct mental qualities.

**Keywords** Attention · Breathing · Focusing · Mindfulness

Instructions for meditating on the breath often emphasize establishing an exclusive focus on the sensation caused by the breath, disregarding anything else in experience. In terms of a distinction proposed by Lutz et al. (2008), meditation on the breath undertaken in this way predominantly involves “focused attention”, in contrast to “open monitoring.” Since in the early Buddhist discourses such practice comes under the heading of “mindfulness” of breathing, a term that does not naturally evoke the idea of focusing, the question arises if such exclusive focus has been a predominant characteristic of this particular meditation practice from the outset.

## The Preliminaries to the Sixteen Steps

Instructions on mindfulness of breathing in the early Buddhist discourses take the form of sixteen distinct steps of practice. Such instructions are found in the *Samyutta-nikāya* and the *Samyukta-āgama*, discourse collections extant in Pāli and Chinese respectively. Each of these collections in fact dedicates a whole section to the topic of

mindfulness of breathing. The actual instructions for mindfulness of breathing are preceded by a description of preliminaries, as follows:

Gone to a forest or to the root of a tree or to an empty hut, one sits down; having folded the legs crosswise, keeping the body erect, and having established mindfulness to the fore, mindful one breathes in and mindful one breathes out.

(SN 54.1: *araññagato vā rukkhamūlagato vā suññāgāragato vā nisīdati pallaṅkaṃ ābhujitvā ujum kāyaṃ pañidhāya parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā, so sato va assasati, sato va passasati*).

One enters a forest or an empty hut or [goes to] the root of a tree or a vacant open ground. Seated properly with the body kept straight and keeping mindfulness to the fore, one abandons lustful cravings in the world and becomes purified by removing sensuality, ill will, sloth-and-torpor, restlessness-and-worry, and doubt, crossing over all perplexity. The mind gains certainty in wholesome states and is far removed from the five hindrances that afflict the mind, that cause a weakening of the power of wisdom, that partake of being obstructive, and that do not lead to Nirvāṇa. One is mindful of the breath coming in, training well to keep being mindful of it, and one is mindful of the breath going out, training well to keep being mindful of it.

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(SĀ 803: 或入林中, 閑房, 樹下, 或空露地. 端身正坐, 繫念面前, 斷世貪愛, 離欲清淨, 瞋恚, 睡眠, 掉悔, 疑斷, 度諸疑惑, 於諸善法心得決定, 遠離五蓋煩惱於心, 令慧力贏, 為障礙分, 不趣涅槃. 念於內息, 繫念善學, 念於外息, 繫念善學).

Both versions of the preliminaries to the practice present a secluded place as the appropriate setting for practicing meditation on the breath. Next one should sit down with the body kept straight and establish mindfulness to the fore, an expression that could also be rendered as “in front.” Pāli Abhidharma exegesis of this passage considers this expression to point to a specific physical location where the breath should be observed, namely the area of the upper lip or the nose tip (Vibh 252). This interpretation remains uncertain, as other Pāli discourses use the same expression in relation to meditation practices that have no relation to the breath (Anālayo 2003). In such cases, attending to the nose tip would not make much sense.

This in turn implies that the instruction given at this juncture need not be seen as requiring a narrow focus on the physical sensations of the breath only. In fact, the expression in question is preceded by the injunction to keep the body straight, something that is of continuous relevance to the remainder of the practice. Some degree of awareness of the whole body would have to be maintained in order to know when the body starts to slouch. From this viewpoint, the idea of bringing mindfulness to the fore could not imply an all-out focus on the upper lip or the nose tip to the exclusion of everything else. Instead, if the upper lip or the nose tip is chosen as the point for noting the breath coming in and going out, this would have to be embedded in at least a minimal degree of mindfulness of the whole body in the sitting posture.

The Chinese version offers additional details on the type of mental seclusion appropriate for such practice, by listing the mental states that should be removed prior to turning to the breath. These correspond to the five hindrances, a set recurrently mentioned in the early discourses as mental states that *hinder* the proper functioning of the mind and hence are obstructive to meditation and progress to liberation. Although the Pāli version does not explicitly mention the hindrances, their temporal removal appears to some extent to be taken for granted, as the ensuing instructions lead up to a concentrated mind without ever mentioning the hindrances. Since successfully concentrating the mind requires the absence of the hindrances, it seems fair to assume that what the Chinese version states explicitly should be understood to be implicit in the Pāli version.

Based on a condition of the mind that is at least temporarily free from the hindrances and with mindfulness well established, one then becomes aware of the breath moving in and out. This is the main target of practice at this juncture, namely a clear discerning of the difference between inhalations and exhalations. This clear discernment forms a background to the remainder of the instructions, which cover sixteen distinct steps of practice. These instructions can conveniently be surveyed by taking them up in sets of four steps or tetrads.

## The First Tetrad

The first tetrad of four steps proceeds as follows:

Breathing in long, one understands: I breathe in long; breathing out long, one understands: I breathe out long. Breathing in short, one understands: I breathe in short; breathing out short, one understands: I breathe out short. One trains: experiencing the whole body I shall breathe in; one trains: experiencing the whole body I shall breathe out. One trains: calming bodily activity I shall breathe in; one trains: calming bodily activity I shall breathe out. (SN 54.1: *dīghaṃ vā assasanto dīghaṃ assasāmī ti pajānāti, dīghaṃ vā passasanto dīghaṃ passasāmī ti pajānāti; rassaṃ vā assasanto rassaṃ assasāmī ti pajānāti, rassaṃ vā passasanto rassaṃ passasāmī ti pajānāti; sabbakāyapaṭisaṃvedī assasissāmī ti sikkhati, sabbakāyapaṭisaṃvedī passasissāmī ti sikkhati; passambhayaṃ kāyasaṅkhāraṃ assasissāmī ti sikkhati, passambhayaṃ kāyasaṅkhāraṃ passasissāmī ti sikkhati*).

Breathing long ... breathing short ... experiencing the whole body when breathing in, one trains well (to experience) the whole body when breathing in; experiencing the whole body when breathing out, one trains well (to experience) the whole body when breathing out. Experiencing a calming of all bodily activity when breathing in, one trains well (to experience) a calming of all bodily activity when breathing in; experiencing a calming of all bodily activity when breathing out, one trains well (to experience) a calming of (all) bodily activity when breathing out.

(SĀ 803: 息長, 息短, 覺知一切身入息, 於一切身入息善學, 覺知一切身出息, 於一切身出息善學, 覺知一切身行息入息, 於一切身行息入息善學, 覺知一切身行息出息, 於一切行息出息善學; the last phrase involves an emendation of 心 to read 切, in order to correct an obvious error).

The instructions in the two versions are fairly similar, even though the first two steps are abbreviated in the Chinese version. The overall progression can be summarized as follows:

long breaths,  
short breaths,  
whole body,  
calm bodily activities.

The first two steps require focused attention. Only by attending closely to the breath will it be possible to know if the breath is long or short. The reference to the “whole body” in the third step has been taken by the *Visuddhimagga*, a path manual of outstanding importance in the Theravāda tradition,

to intend the whole body of the breath (Vism 273). From the viewpoint of the meditative dynamics of the whole scheme, this is not entirely convincing, as the remainder of the meditative steps regularly introduces new elements. The whole of the breath, however, has already been explored with the previous two steps, so that interpreting the third step as requiring attention to the whole length of the breath would not introduce anything substantially new (Nhat Han 1990). Consultation of several parallel versions to this step, extant in texts on monastic discipline (*Vinaya*), supports the impression that the whole physical body might rather be meant here (Anālayo 2013). This would then imply a shift of attention from a stronger degree of focus during the first two steps to then becoming aware of the whole body in the sitting posture.

The fourth step of calming bodily activity has at times been taken to imply the attainment of the fourth absorption. For example, Ṭhānissaro (2012, p. 99) took the position that “the first tetrad ... describes the progress of breath meditation up through the fourth *jhāna*.” This interpretation is hardly convincing, since according to other early discourses, the breath is no longer experienced in the fourth absorption (SN 36.15 and SĀ 474). Yet, the instructions clearly require that, alongside calming bodily activity, one is aware of inhalations and exhalations. This is in fact a continuous feature of the progression of practice in the remainder of the scheme, namely that implementation of each particular meditative step takes place alongside mindfulness of inhalations and exhalations.

## The Second Tetrad

The second tetrad proceeds in this way:

One trains: experiencing joy I shall breathe in; one trains: experiencing joy I shall breathe out. One trains: experiencing happiness I shall breathe in; one trains: experiencing happiness I shall breathe out. One trains: experiencing mental activity I shall breathe in; one trains: experiencing mental activity I shall breathe out. One trains: calming mental activity I shall breathe in; one trains: calming mental activity I shall breathe out. (SN 54.1: *pītipaṭisaṃvedī assasissāmī ti sikkhati, pītipaṭisaṃvedī passasissāmī ti sikkhati; sukhaṭisaṃvedī assasissāmī ti sikkhati, sukhaṭisaṃvedī passasissāmī ti sikkhati; cittasaṅkhārapaṭisaṃvedī assasissāmī ti sikkhati, cittasaṅkhārapaṭisaṃvedī passasissāmī ti sikkhati; passambhayaṃ cittasaṅkhāraṃ assasissāmī ti sikkhati, passambhayaṃ cittasaṅkhāraṃ passasissāmī ti sikkhati*).

Experiencing joy ... experiencing happiness ... experiencing (mental) activity ... experiencing a

calming of mental activity when breathing in, one trains well to experience a calming of mental activity when breathing in; experiencing a calming of mental activity when breathing out, one trains well to experience a calming of mental activity when breathing out.

(SĀ 803: 覺知喜, 覺知樂, 覺知(心), 覺知心行息入息, 於覺知心行息入息善學, 覺知心行息出息, 於覺知心行息出息善學; the third phrase involves an emendation of 身 to 心; the original reading is clearly a copyist error influenced by the previous tetrad).

The instructions in the two parallel versions are closely similar, involving the following four steps:

experience joy,  
experience happiness,  
experience mental activity,  
calm mental activity.

Whereas the instructions for the first tetrad have met with different interpretations, the present set of four steps seems fairly straightforward. It definitely does not involve focused attention only. Instead, it requires breadth of mind in order to accommodate for two different tasks to be performed jointly. One task is to proceed through the four steps listed above, whereas the other task is to remain mindful of whether the breath is presently coming in or going out.

The progression of the four steps in this tetrad is of further interest, as it reflects a skillful employment of the experiences of joy and happiness leading to an eventual calming of mental activity. This conforms with a meditative dynamic evident elsewhere in the early discourses, where the arising of joy leads to tranquility of the mind.

## The Third Tetrad

Here are the instructions for the third tetrad:

One trains: experiencing the mind I shall breathe in; one trains: experiencing the mind I shall breathe out. One trains: gladdening the mind I shall breathe in; one trains: gladdening the mind I shall breathe out. One trains: concentrating the mind I shall breathe in; one trains: concentrating the mind I shall breathe out. One trains: liberating the mind I shall breathe in; one trains: liberating the mind I shall breathe out.

(SN 54.1: *cittapaṭisaṃvedī assasissāmī ti sikkhati, cittaṭisaṃvedī passasissāmī ti sikkhati; abhippamodayaṃ cittaṃ assasissāmī ti sikkhati, abhippamodayaṃ cittaṃ passasissāmī ti sikkhati; samādahaṃ cittaṃ assasissāmī ti sikkhati, samādahaṃ cittaṃ passasissāmī ti sikkhati; vimocayaṃ cittaṃ*

*assasissāmī ti sikkhati, vimocayaṃ cittaṃ passasissāmī ti sikkhati).*

Experiencing the mind ... experiencing a gladdening of the mind ... experiencing a concentrating of the mind ... experiencing liberating the mind when breathing in, one trains well to experience liberating the mind when breathing in; experiencing liberating the mind when breathing out, one trains well to experience liberating the mind when breathing out.

(SĀ 803: 覺知心, 覺知心悅, 覺知心定, 覺知心解脫入息, 於覺知心解脫入息善學, 覺知心解脫出息, 於覺知心解脫出息善學).

The instructions in the two parallels are again closely similar and cover the following four steps:

experience the mind,  
gladden the mind,  
concentrate the mind,  
liberate the mind.

Similar to the case of the previous tetrad, here, too, the mental quality necessary to execute these steps cannot be just focused attention. Instead, breadth of mind is required to combine these four steps with continuous mindfulness of inbreaths and outbreaths.

In line with a basic pattern evident in the previous tetrad, the skillful employment of wholesome types of pleasant experience, which in this tetrad takes the form of gladness, here leads to concentrating the mind. The pleasantness of the experience of joy, happiness, or gladness exerts a natural attraction on the mind and thereby counters its ingrained tendency to wander off (Brewer et al. 2013). In conjunction with the previous tetrad, the meditative progression here makes it clear why mindfulness of breathing features regularly in the early discourses as a practice that can overcome mental distraction (e.g., AN 9.3 and MĀ 56).

## The Fourth Tetrad

The fourth tetrad proceeds as follows:

One trains: contemplating impermanence I shall breathe in; one trains: contemplating impermanence I shall breathe out. One trains: contemplating dispassion I shall breathe in; one trains: contemplating dispassion I shall breathe out. One trains: contemplating cessation I shall breathe in; one trains: contemplating cessation I shall breathe out. One trains: contemplating letting go I shall breathe in; one trains: contemplating letting go I shall breathe out.

(SN 54.1: *aniccānupassī assasissāmī ti sikkhati, aniccānupassī passasissāmī ti sikkhati; virāgānupassī assasissāmī ti sikkhati, virāgānupassī passasissāmī ti sikkhati; nirodhānupassī assasissāmī ti sikkhati, nirodhānupassī passasissāmī ti sikkhati; paṭinissaggānupassī assasissāmī ti sikkhati, paṭinissaggānupassī passasissāmī ti sikkhati).*

Contemplating impermanence ... contemplating eradication ... contemplating dispassion ... contemplating cessation when breathing in, one trains well to contemplate cessation when breathing in; contemplating cessation when breathing out, one trains well to contemplate cessation when breathing out.

(SĀ 803: 觀察無常, 觀察斷, 觀察無欲, 觀察減入息, 於觀察減入息善學, 觀察減出息, 於觀察減出息善學).

In this case, the parallel discourses differ. Both take off from contemplation of impermanence, but then proceed in slightly different ways, which can be seen from Table 1.

Despite such differences, however, the two versions clearly agree in combining insight-related contemplations with continuous mindfulness of inhalations and exhalations. This in turn implies that, similar to the case of the preceding two tetrads, here again the task cannot be one of focused attention alone. Instead, breadth of the attentional field is required in order to combine contemplation of the progressive insight themes with the discernment of the breath as coming in or going out.

From the viewpoint of the deployment of focused attention, a survey of the sixteen steps of practice shows that the majority of these require breadth of attention. Focus clearly has its place, but this appears to be predominantly in relation to the first two steps. How far the same holds for the third and fourth steps seems doubtful, as this involves interpretations that do not seem particularly convincing. But for the remainder of the scheme, the situation is clear-cut: the quality required is breadth of attention instead of focus.

## The Buddha's Pre-Awakening Ascetic Practices in Relation to the Breath

The early Buddhist approach to meditation on the breath differs from the ancient Indian practice of breath control. The

**Table 1** Comparative survey of the last tetrad

Pāli:	Chinese:
Impermanence	Impermanence
Dispassion	Eradication
Cessation	Dispassion
Letting go	Cessation

early discourses report that the Buddha himself engaged in such practice during his quest for awakening.

The relevant discourses in fact describe him undertaking a range of ascetic practices while seeking a way to liberation. Closer inspection of the relevant texts shows that some of these descriptions refer to experiences had during a previous life (Anālayo 2017). Hence, for his progress to awakening in his last life, only three types of ascetic practices appear to be of direct relevance: the attempt to control the mind by sheer force, breath control, and fasting. These practices are reported in three discourse parallels: a Pāli discourse in the *Majjhima-nikāya*, a version extant in Sanskrit fragments, and a discourse in the *Ekottarika-āgama* preserved in Chinese translation.

Comparison of these three parallels shows that the *Ekottarika-āgama* discourse has three descriptions of breath control, whereas the Pāli and Sanskrit versions present five such descriptions. In contrast, the three parallels describe the other ascetic practices of forceful mind control and fasting only once. This gives the impression that the Buddha-to-be had a particular interest in the breath, since he tried out three or even five forms of breath control before giving it up as not conducive to awakening.

According to the Buddha's autobiographical report of his pre-awakening asceticism, one such attempt to control the breath resulted in severe headache, which illustrates the intensity of his striving:

I stopped the inhalations and exhalations through my mouth, nose, and ears. The inhalations and exhalations through my mouth, nose, and ears being stopped, there was an excessive headache in my head.

(MN 36: *mukhato ca nāsato ca kaṇṇato ca assāsapassāse uparundhiṃ. tassa mayhaṃ ... mukhato ca nāsato ca kaṇṇato ca assāsapassāse uparuddhesu adhimattā sīse sīsavedanā honti*).

I stopped inhalations and exhalations through the mouth and nose. Having stopped inhalations and exhalations through the mouth and nose, all the winds struck my head and there was an excessive headache in my head. (Liu 2010, p. 171: *so 'ha(m) mukhato nāsikāyā(ṃ)ś cāśvāsaprasvāsāṃ sannirūṇadhmi, tasya mama mukhato nāsikāyā(ś cā)śvāsaprasvāseṣu sanniruddheṣu sarvo vāyu(r) mūrdhnānam abhīhanti. tasya mamāthyaṛthaṃ mūrdhni mūrdhna vedanā varttante*).

Then, I completely blocked all apertures for the breath. Then, due to all my [apertures] for breathing in or out having been blocked, I was in turn afflicted by pain in the forehead.

(EĀ 31.8: 是時盡塞諸孔之息。我已塞諸出入息，是時便患頭額痛)。

Similar to the other ascetic practices, in the end, such breath control did not lead the future Buddha to awakening. Nevertheless, after having reached the goal of his aspiration, the Buddha did not discard the breath as a potential tool for practice. However, he thoroughly revised his perspective on how to use it, by shifting from forceful control to mindful observation.

The three passages translated above in fact agree in conveying a sense of forceful control, exerted to such an extent that it caused a strong headache. In contrast, the sixteen steps of mindfulness of breathing do not involve stopping the breath or forcing it to be a particular way. Instead of an attempt to enforce control, they rather require mere observation through mindfulness.

As discussed above, a prominent characteristic of the sixteen steps is breadth of attention, rather than an exclusive concern with the breath alone, be this by way of focusing on the sensations caused by the breath or by attempting to control it. Instead of an exclusive approach, the mode of practice described in early Buddhist texts in the form of sixteen steps is rather inclusive, as it involves a mindful monitoring that is able to combine awareness of inhalations and exhalations with a range of other meditative topics or themes.

## Reduction of the Sixteen Steps

An emphasis on breadth of attention and mindful monitoring does not necessarily characterize the way mindfulness of breathing is taught in contemporary Buddhist traditions, which often place considerably more emphasis on focused attention on the breath itself to the exclusion of anything else. The tendency to emphasize such focused attention on the breath can be better appreciated from an historical perspective.

One significant development here is a reduction of the above scheme to its first steps only, already evident in some early discourses (Anālayo 2019b). For appreciating this reduction, it needs to be kept in mind that expositions of the sixteen steps of mindfulness of breathing in the *Ānāpānasati-sutta* and its *Samyukta-āgama* parallel match the four tetrads with the four *satipaṭṭhānas*. In doing so, they identify the first four steps of mindfulness of breathing as an instance of contemplation of the body (MN 118 and SĀ 810).

Expositions of the topic of mindfulness of the body in the *Kāyagatāsati-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel then mention only these first four steps of mindfulness of breathing (MN 119 and MĀ 81). In general, these two discourses can be seen to reflect an attempt to collect various mindfulness-related practices that take the body as their object. Given the identification of the first tetrad with mindfulness of the body, it is hardly surprising if at some point in the oral transmission of the *Kāyagatāsati-sutta* and its parallel, these first four steps should have come to be included in an exposition whose overall topic is contemplation of the body.



Yet, as a result of this apparent development, the first four steps appear as if they were a complete practice in their own right. From such a perspective, all one needs to do to achieve the frequently mentioned benefit of mindfulness of breathing in countering mental distraction are the following four steps:

long breaths,  
short breaths,  
whole body,  
calm bodily activities.

The first two of these four steps clearly require focus. If the third step is interpreted to refer also to just the breath and the fourth step is seen as corresponding to the attainment of the fourth absorption, then the whole meditative dynamic changes, as the entire practice is about the breath only. It no longer involves combining awareness of the breath with other topics, as evident in the remainder of the scheme of sixteen steps. Most important of all, perhaps, is that the potential support offered by joy, happiness, and gladness to lead to mental concentration is no longer evident.

### Further Reduction to Only Two Steps

A tendency to further reduction can be seen in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, which similar to the *Kāyagatāsati-sutta* has incorporated the first four steps of mindfulness of breathing in its survey of contemplations of the body. It seems probable that the incorporation as such started with the *Kāyagatāsati-sutta*, as only the first tetrad from the sixteen steps has made it into the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*. Had it started with the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, one might reasonably expect for all four tetrads to be assigned to the respective four *satipaṭṭhānas*. This suggests that at the start the first tetrad would have become part of an exposition of contemplation of the body in the *Kāyagatāsati-sutta*. During the process of oral transmission, this would then have influenced the exposition of the same topic of contemplation of the body in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*.

Now, the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*'s exposition of mindfulness of breathing differs in one respect from the *Kāyagatāsati-sutta*. Both mention the preliminaries and the first four steps, but the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* also presents a simile to illustrate the practice. Here are the instructions together with the simile:

Breathing in long, one understands: I breathe in long;  
breathing out long, one understands: I breathe out long.  
Breathing in short, one understands: I breathe in short;  
breathing out short, one understands: I breathe out short.  
One trains: experiencing the whole body I shall breathe in;  
one trains: experiencing the whole body I shall breathe out.  
One trains: calming bodily activity I shall

breathe in; one trains: calming bodily activity I shall breathe out.

Monastics, it is just as a skilled turner or a turner's apprentice who understands, when making a long turn: I make a long turn; understands, when making a short turn: I make a short turn.

(MN 10: *dīghaṃ vā assasanto dīghaṃ assasāmī ti pajānāti, dīghaṃ vā passasanto dīghaṃ passasāmī ti pajānāti, rassaṃ vā assasanto rassaṃ assasāmī ti pajānāti, rassaṃ vā passasanto rassaṃ passasāmī ti pajānāti, sabbakāyapaṭisaṃvedī assasissāmī ti sikkhati, sabbakāyapaṭisaṃvedī passasissāmī ti sikkhati, passambhayaṃ kāyasaṅkhāraṃ assasissāmī ti sikkhati, passambhayaṃ kāyasaṅkhāraṃ passasissāmī ti sikkhati.*

*seyyathā pi, bhikkhave, dakkho bhamakāro vā bhamakārantevāsī vā dīghaṃ vā añchanto dīghaṃ añchāmī ti pajānāti, rassaṃ vā añchanto rassaṃ añchāmī ti pajānāti).*

Since this simile is not found in the *Kāyagatāsati-sutta*, it seems that it was added at a relatively late time to the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, too late to make it also into the *Kāyagatāsati-sutta*. The simile itself is of significance to the tendency to reduction discussed above, as it only illustrates the first two steps. The turner at work on the lathe exemplifies the knowing of long and short breaths; it does not exemplify experiencing the whole body or calming the bodily activity.

The impression that this could indeed be a hint at further reduction can be confirmed by turning to an early Abhidharma work, the 舍利弗阿毘曇論 (T 1548), whose title is often reconstructed as “*Sāriputrābhidharma*.” Early Abhidharma works can be consulted to discern textual developments setting in at a time soon after the period reflected by the early discourses. The relevant part corresponds to the passage translated above from the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*:

Breathing out long one knows it to be long, and breathing in long knows it to be long. Breathing out short one knows it to be short, and breathing in short knows it to be short.

It is like a master turner who pulls the cord, pulling it long [the master turner] knows it to be long and pulling it short knows it to be short.

(T XXVIII 613b: 出息長知長, 入息長知長, 出息短知短, 入息短知短。

如旋師挽繩, 繩長知長繩短知短)。

Here only the first two steps are found, illustrated by basically the same simile of a turner at his lathe. In this way, the reduction of the sixteen steps to its first four steps eventually led to emphasis on only the first two steps. At this stage of development in instructions on meditation on

the breath, the whole practice is just about knowing if the breath is long or short.

## Just Focus on the Breath

From knowing the length of the breath as either long or short, it does not take too much to go still further and conceive of the entire practice as just requiring a focus on the breath itself. Such a shift can be seen in a Pāli path manual called the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*. This work is considered canonical in the Theravāda tradition, but apparently came into being too late to make it into the canonical Abhidharma collection. Its discussion of mindfulness of breathing no longer has the turner simile, and instead illustrate the practice with a description of a person who is sawing a piece of wood:

It is like a tree trunk placed on even ground and a person were to cut it with a saw. The person's mindfulness is established on account of the wood being touched by the teeth of the saw, without paying attention to the approaching and receding of the teeth of the saw. (Paṭis I 171: *seyyathā pi rukkho same bhūmibhāge nikkhitto, tamenam puriso kakacena chindeyya. rukkhe phuṭṭhakakacadantānaṃ vasena purisassa sati upaṭṭhitā hoti; na āgate vā gate vā kakacadante manasikaroti*).

The same replacement of the turner simile with the description of a person sawing, in order to illustrate the cultivation of breath meditation, can also be seen in another path manual extant in Chinese translation, the 解脫道論 (T 1648), usually referred to by the Pāli name *Vimuttimaggā*.

It is like a person who cuts wood by means of the edge of a saw and strength, and without paying attention to perceptions of the approaching and receding of the saw. (T XXXII 430a: 如人解材以緣鋸力, 亦不作意鋸去來想; adopting the variant 解 instead of 觸).

The *Paṭisambhidāmagga* is one of the chief sources for the discussion of mindfulness of breathing in the *Visuddhimaggā*, which also appears to have been influenced by the *Vimuttimaggā*. Hence, it is no surprise to find the simile of sawing wood in the *Visuddhimaggā*'s discussion of mindfulness of breathing (Vism 281).

Now, the turner simile still reflects concern with the length of the breath. For the turner at the lathe, it makes quite a difference whether a short or a long turn is taken. Once the illustration shifts to sawing wood, however, short or long is no longer of comparable relevance. What counts now is just the place where the saw touches, where it cuts into the wood. It does not really matter if the forward and backward motions of the saw are long or short,

what matters is that it keeps cutting the wood at the same place. Similarly, as the final result of the development surveyed in this article, the main concern of meditating on the breath becomes just to focus on the place where the breath touches.

Although this is of course a viable form of meditation, just focusing on the breath to the exclusion of everything else is different from the type of practice by way of proceeding through sixteen steps which according to the early discourses was undertaken by the Buddha himself, after his awakening, and taught by him to others. Such practice has a better claim to being reckoned *mindfulness* of breathing than mere focus on just the touch sensation of the breath.

## Counting the Breaths

The need to compensate for the loss of the organic meditative dynamics underlying the whole scheme of sixteen steps would in turn explain the emergence of meditative techniques that require counting the breaths. These are not found in the early discourses, but only in later meditation manuals (Dhammajoti 2009).

The *Visuddhimaggā* recommends counting between five and ten breaths. First one should count when each breath is complete, and later as soon as each one starts (Vism 278). A meditation manual by Kumārajīva, extant in Chinese (T 614), also recommends counting up to ten. With increasing expertise, one should make sure to count exactly when the breath ends and start all over again if one has miscounted (T XV 273a).

## Mindfulness and Focused Attention

Mindfulness in early Buddhist thought features as a rather versatile quality that can be combined with a range of other mental qualities. Hence, it can also coexist with focused attention. In fact, the first two steps in the scheme of mindfulness of breathing clearly do involve focus. At the same time, however, mindfulness and focused attention are not identical. At least from the viewpoint of early Buddhist thought, mindfulness on its own rather has nuances of breadth of mind (Anālayo 2019a). This nuance appears to be indeed relevant to most of the meditative progression in sixteen steps. For this reason, meditation on the breath comes under the heading of being “mindfulness” of breathing rather than “focusing” on breathing (Anālayo 2020).

This in turn is of relevance to current research on mindfulness. As pointed out by Ridderinkhof et al. (2017, p. 262), “a mindfulness exercise with focus on the breath does not fully capture the mindfulness construct.” In other words, research on breath meditation, employing techniques like counting the breath and cultivating an exclusive focus on the physical

sensation of the breath experienced at the nose tip, does not necessarily reflect the qualities and potential of mindfulness when it is cultivated on its own.

## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Ethical Approval** This article does not contain any studies performed by the author with human participants or animals.

**Conflict of Interest** The author declares no conflict of interest.

**Abbreviations** MĀ, *Madhyama-āgama* (T 26); MN, *Majjhima-nikāya*; Paṭis, *Paṭisambhidāmagga*; SĀ, *Saṃyukta-āgama* (T 99); SN, *Saṃyutta-nikāya*; T, Taishō edition; Vibh, *Vibhaṅga*; Vism, *Visuddhimagga*; 〈 〉, *Emendation*

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